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February 1, 1974

Intelligence Memorandum

Subject: South Korea: Can Pak Hold On?

Precis

For over three months, President Pak Chong-hui has been under attack by domestic critics demanding liberalization of the authoritarian constitutional system he instituted in late 1972. The protests, though narrower in scope and less intense than those of the mid-1960s, represent a more significant threat to Pak's leadership in three basic ways:

--the criticism is focused on the President himself and the type of government he has established, rather than on the particular policies of his regime;

--the opposition for the first time under Pak's rule represents significant numbers of students, intellectuals, clergy and politicians who in various ways are articulating the political and economic grievances of a growing number of South Koreans;

--the protests are occurring at a time when the effectiveness of Pak's traditional devices for diverting or stifling criticism (including perhaps even the use of force) is eroding.

Pak is relying on a combination of coercion and some conciliation to contain and isolate his critics. His efforts will probably be successful in the short term. The opposition, though widespread and determined, is not highly organized.

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Resentment against Pak's authoritarian policies is sure to grow nonetheless. He is hoping to prevent the students in Seoul from igniting the sparks set elsewhere in East Asia recently. But there is a continuing potential for serious political instabilities in this modernizing society where political safety valves are lacking. And Pak cannot count on maintaining tight control indefinitely.

DISCUSSION

Pak Chong-hui has been in control of South Korea for almost 13 years--longer even than Syngman Rhee. He is very proud of the unprecedented stability and economic development in Korea during this period. Ironically these blessings have begun to work against his personal control. He can no longer as easily claim that limits and a curb on popular dissent are necessary for growth. Nonetheless, Pak continues to firmly believe that a combination of strong leadership and economic prosperity is what South Korea needs and what the people really want. His authoritarian constitutional system is based on the thesis that continued economic growth requires a type of stability only possible in Korea under a rigidly controlled political system in which real popular participation has no place. The crux of the present impasse is that a growing number of South Koreans are no longer willing to accept this premise.

The expectations of the urban masses and the lower middle class have been aroused by the Korean economic "miracle," and they now want some of the benefits themselves. The middle class no longer sees the need of sacrificing political freedom and individual rights when the economy is producing at peak capacity and is managed not by Pak but by a well-trained and experienced corps of specialists. As for the military, the traditional bulwark of Pak's authority after a decade of civilian rule, the bulk of the officer corps is no longer highly politicized. Indeed, Pak's generation of officers is fast passing into retirement and those entering the senior colonel and general officer ranks no longer identify with him as a military leader and do not share the old factional alignments through which he has traditionally exercised control.

The recognition that these changes were taking place was a key factor in Pak's establishment of a more authoritarian form of government in 1972. The changes brought to the surface his basic distrust of

representative government and the limitations it places on executive power. Pak had tolerated these trappings for almost a decade, partly out of deference to the US but also because the political system was subservient to his will. The growth of political opposition--symbolized by the very close presidential election in 1971--convinced Pak that it was necessary to tighten his control of the nation if he was to continue to rule. Similar action by the government of the Philippines in 1972 demonstrated that a reversion to authoritarian government had not provoked strong reaction from the US or other western powers.

The Current Situation

Small-scale student protests that began in Seoul last fall were not viewed with great alarm by the South Korean leadership. Though surprising to many--including Pak--the protests reflected grievances against the regime's increasing reliance on internal security services to ensure adherence to Pak's policies. The students were also upset by the CIA's kidnaping of opposition leader Kim Tae-chung. Small scale student demonstrations had occurred the previous spring, but Pak had little reason to believe this was of more deeply rooted opposition.

Indeed, before the Kim affair, 1973 was shaping up as a particularly good year for the regime. The economy--which Pak uses as a political barometer--was booming and the general population appeared to have accepted the sweeping constitutional changes placidly. It was not surprising, then, that Pak approached the October 1973 student disorders as he had those in previous years, employing a combination of force, intimidation and guarded concessions. It quickly became apparent, however, that this new dissidence was somehow different. Despite use of time-tested suppression techniques, student agitation spread outside the capital, and the focus of criticism shifted from the pervasive role of the security services to the shortcomings of the regime itself--including Pak's virtual life tenure. What Pak failed to see was that his new system was not accepted as necessary for the

growth of the nation. Rather it was regarded by an increasing number of South Koreans as tantamount to dictatorship, sealing the political environment for the forseeable future. The student challenge provided a catalyst around which other opposition forces began to coalecse.

Less than a month after the initial student demonstrations, clusters of Christian clergymen and some intellectuals centered chiefly in Seoul began to organize to support the student demands and to call for additional reforms on their own, in petitions and by demonstrations. They were shortly joined by a broad range of intellectuals--poets, writers, elder statesmen.

Surprised by the groundswell of support for the students, Pak quickly countered with some conciliatory gestures. In early December, once the universities were closed and the students quiet, the Cabinet was reorganized, the role of the ROK Central Intelligence Agency sharply circumscribed and its feared chief ousted. Students who had been arrested or expelled were reinstated in their schools. Most significantly, Pak authorized Prime Minister Kim Chong-pil to initiate a dialogue with opposition groups in an effort to ease their concerns. At this point, Pak appears to have believed these measures would put an end to most of the turmoil.

Pak's concessions only increased demands for genuine political reform, however. Opposition politicians and some from within Pak's own party interpreted the government's willingness to deal with the dissidents as an opportunity to refurbish their own heavily tarnished political credentials. Many made critical remarks, joining the chorus of those calling for political reform.

Stung by what he perceived as a callous rejection of significant concessions and a direct challenge to his continued leadership, Pak responded vigorously. Overriding the recommendation for moderation by a committee of senior bureaucrats established to deal with

the situation, he announced tough emergency decrees, threatening imprisonment to critics of regime policy. At the same time, the CIA was returned to its former power and prominence in internal security affairs.

A Test of Wills

The emergency decrees represent a gamble by PAK that the threat of arrest and imprisonment will intimidate his most vocal critics and prevent a further coalescence of opposition political groups before the universities reopen in late February and early March. These decrees--together with increased surveillance and harassment of regime critics--form the core of Pak's strategy for dealing with the present problem. They are supplemented, however, by a series of positive gestures designed to shore up popular support for the regime by alleviating problems of the urban poor. The regime is also attempting to project new flexibility on the highly popular issue of unification by proposing a non-aggression pact with the North. And Pak has launched an anti-corruption campaign which--unlike those of earlier years--may actually result in the arrest and trial of senior government officials in an effort to demonstrate the regime's resolve on this issue.

Pak is relying chiefly on the coercive aspects of the emergency decrees to contain the opposition. He is fully prepared to use his emergency authority to deal with any critics, but he wants to do so selectively and in a manner that minimizes the possibility of an incident which could provoke even greater unrest.

The Opposition

Pak's most serious problem in the next several weeks will come from the Christians. They are better organized than any other opposition force, have considerable influence within South Korean society, which is 13 percent Christian, and enjoy excellent

contact with allied religious institutions in the United States and Europe.

The Christian groups opposed to Pak are spearheaded by a small number of militant clergymen, many resolved to openly resist the government's recent decrees. Though not representative of the generally conservative Catholic and Protestant leadership, they have strong links with Christian student groups on most major Seoul campuses, with various social action programs in Seoul's factories and slums, and within intellectual and political circles where Christian influence has been significant for a number of years.

Cardinal Kim Su-hwan, a persistent and outspoken critic of Pak's policies, is perhaps the most representative of this liberal clerical element. Kim is committed to pressuring the government through peaceful protest and petition to modify its present policies and is willing to risk the regime's heavy hand in continuing to do so. He and many of his religious colleagues want an amendment of the present constitution which would limit presidential tenure, restoration of the National Assembly to its former prominence, and the provision of a free political atmosphere for the press and ordinary citizens, in part by curbing by statute the activities of the internal security services. Like the vast majority of South Koreans, Kim and other Christian leaders do not want the political instability which they fear would follow Pak's forceable removal from office. But the depth of the disenchantment with Pak can be seen in the apparent commitment of at least some liberal Christians to the overthrow of Pak if he does not modify his present policies.

The Christians are supported by most of the nation's intellectuals, the press and undoubtedly the bulk of informed South Koreans who strongly believe in a liberalization of the regime's policies. Many are prepared to press for changes but only--at this point--if the danger of retaliation is not too great. In

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the space of only three weeks a group of intellectuals and clerics circulating a reform petition were able to amass almost half a million signatures--including some 50 retired generals. Yet at best the Christians have been able to marshal only a few hundred people in street demonstrations.

For the present, Pak's actions have given pause to most of the Christian leaders.

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The government's arrest of a number of ministers engaged in Christian social action has intimidated others. Pak is also trying to block efforts by Christian social organizations to develop more direct links to workers through a Protestant-Catholic Labor Coalition. He also has in his arsenal the time-tested weapon of anti-communism, which he has instructed his CIA to fully exploit. Last December, he demonstrated his ability to marshal thousands of pro-government Christians on the streets under the anti-Communist banner.

Without a broad base of popular support, which probably only the students in the universities can provide, the Christian activists and their intellectual supporters can probably be contained. The regime has already forced a number of such critics to sign pledges eschewing further protest, and over the next several weeks more will also be invited to sign under threat of CIA arrest

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The Christians can expect little support from the politicians. The last to join the groundswell against Pak, they have quickly retreated to the sidelines under pressure. Only a few outspoken followers of Kim Tae-chung from within the New Democratic Party may be willing to risk the wrath of the government, and their arrest would cause no great stir. Most politicians will bide their time and watch events as they are played out. They are followers not leaders. Some may make timid and easily side-tracked efforts to have the National Assembly

test the legality of the regime's actions but do little more.

If Pak succeeds in keeping the political temperature down in the next few weeks, as appears likely, he must nonetheless face the very real possibility of a resumption of student unrest when the universities reopen in late February and early March. The emergency decrees, the arrests of Christian ministers and other critics--and their probable trials--will provide the students with additional issues they can be expected to exploit. A demonstration at two of the more conservative colleges at Yonsei University this month during class make-up sessions underscored the continued hostile mood on Seoul's campuses. Many students believe they achieved a minor victory last fall only to have it snatched from them by the heavy hand of the regime. They appear resolved to press their own demands for reform in the streets or through a boycott of classes.

Pak clearly recognizes the potential of the 60,000 students in Seoul, and he is determined to bring the full force of his authority to deal with campus unrest. This places the students at a clear disadvantage. They have no national organization, nor has any national student leadership evolved from last fall's disturbances. The professors and other intellectuals who supported them at that time can do so now only at considerably greater risk. Their links to other opposition elements, including the Christians, are tenuous.

President Pak has stated publicly that he will permit some campus debate on regime policies but, as a contingency, the government is prepared to reinstitute martial law to maintain order if the students take to the streets. This would probably mean closing the schools, ending all political activity, and complete censorship of the already tightly controlled press. It would also mean injecting the army into the tense political atmosphere--a course Pak sought to avoid. He is well aware that the army probably

would not fire on the students if it came to that--and that any such refusal by the army leadership could easily lead to his downfall as it did in the case of Rhee in 1960.

Pak's determination to see the situation through is implicit in his contingency planning, and he would probably have the support of key elements within the government--the army, police, and security agencies--in attempting to do so. There is, however broad concern within the bureaucracy, and even to some extent in the police and army, that the president's tough measures are ill-advised, and that a continuation of his rigid policies will lead only to greater unrest. Many fear that because Pak has found it necessary to revert to reliance on the CIA to support his policy, he is only feeding resentment and intensifying disaffection. They recognize that even if Pak is successful in containing the present situation without violence, he will continue to face growing unrest unless there is some change in his authoritarian policies.

Pak appears well aware of the extent of popular disaffection. The CIA has shown him polls indicating that only 31 percent of the nation support his 1972 revitalizing measures. Yet he appears determined to maintain his very firm control. Although he meets regularly with his key lieutenants, he is alone in making the decisions on how to deal with the situation. Many of his advisers--including Prime Minister Kim Chong-pil--are reluctant to urge moderation lest they appear to be supporting those seeking the president's ouster.

The North Korean Element

While focused on the tense domestic situation, Pak must also keep a weather eye on North Korea. Pyongyang's attitudes and actions probably do not, at this stage, greatly affect Pak's judgments on domestic political matters. But he fully appreciates the necessity for guarding against any material attempt by the North to exploit the unrest in the South.

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Pak is not likely to take any actions to provoke the North and increase tension on the peninsula, however. He recognizes that the advantages any such step might offer domestically would be far out-weighed by the risks of North Korean reaction.

Pyongyang is following developments in the South very closely. Its propaganda coverage of the unrest has been extensive since the initial student demonstrations. It is portraying the Pak government as teetering on the brink of collapse and has implicitly called for Pak's ouster. Pyongyang appears particularly sensitive to Seoul's allegation that it has adopted a more hostile posture, and is devoting much of its coverage of the situation to refuting this charge. At the same time, Pyongyang is anxious to avoid providing Pak any material which would buttress his case against the North and help justify the emergency decrees. Pyongyang has even eschewed raising the matter of the conflicting territorial claims off the west coast in recent weeks at the Military Armistice Commission meetings so that Seoul will not have a forum in which to accuse the North of creating new tension in the area.

Pyongyang has little or no ability to directly affect developments in the South. There is no evidence that it is in any way involved in the Christian student movements and even the South Koreans do not appear overly concerned about the activities of the smattering of North Korean agents at the present time. Pyongyang is committed to standing on the sidelines and cheering for the revolution in the South--it does not have the influence to stimulate or direct it.

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The US Element

Pak has calculated for some time that he can go to considerable lengths in restructuring the political life of South Korea without seriously upsetting his ties with Washington, but there are certain things he knows he cannot do. One is to risk bringing the US military commitment into jeopardy unnecessarily. Nor can he openly embarrass the US by dealing harshly with its citizens--especially missionaries--or by taking repressive measures against large segments of the society in a way that would stimulate international attention. He is guarding against all three.

The Longer Term

Pak is reported to be studying the "stabilizing effects" of prolonged martial law in the Philippines. This may be what he has in mind for South Korea in the period ahead. The events of the past few months have reinforced this view that tough measures are the best means of silencing his critics. But he must also recognize that such draconian tactics will drive the opposition underground and probably cause it to grow, thus heightening and perpetuating the existing political tensions. In such circumstances, Seoul's economic development could be seriously affected. Foreign investment--the key to South Korea's continued economic growth--could be frightened off. Tokyo has already cut its investments for a combination of political and economic reasons, and US and European investors--which Seoul now is actively courting--could also turn cautious. A loss of foreign capital would be doubly serious now that the South Korean economic growth rate will be reduced by more than 50 percent this year because of energy-related problems.

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if unrest persists and obviously affects economic development, he could consider resigning. This does not appear likely, however, unless Pak is faced

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with a situation of intense political turmoil in which his army support shows signs of wavering. But Pak's concern about economic development could be a key factor causing him to take certain other major concessionary steps. One possiility is a series of amendments to the Constitution providing for presidential succession, enhancing the role of the National Assembly, and otherwise circumscribing to some estent the power of the executive. Pak has made similar concessions in the past when pressures had to be contained, but the danger in the current situation is that his deicsion to bend might come too late. An untoward incident--the shooting of a student, a refusal by troops to quell a riot or to fire on demonstrators, the death of a prominent clergyman, could easily bring about a situation which Pak might be unable to control. Pak is betting, however, that the sort of spark that ignited Bangkok a few months ago will not be struck in Seoul. But there is a clear potential upset in a modernizing society in which political safety valves are lacking. And Pak cannot count on maintaining tight control indefinitely.